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ABSTRACT

Most students today have been reared on television and have had only slight brushes with the parts of grammar. Nevertheless, a variety of sentence pattern exercises and sentence combining lessons based on the students' own writing can be used to augment, challenge and improve students' writing skills and vocabulary. In the first exercise, students receive a xerox copy of one or two drafts of their fellow students' writing. Each student then counts the number of words in each sentence of a paragraph and underlines the subject and verb of each sentence: the student then rewrites and combines two short sentences using conjunctions, semicolons, or colons. In the second exercise, each student rewrites at least three sentences in a different paragraph and indicates which is his/her worst rewritten sentence. Students work in teams to help each other rewrite the poorly rewritten sentences. If class time permits, the students then rewrite the entire paragraph. This series of exercises helps students learn more vocabulary and to use those semicolons and colons which seem to have disappeared down the television tubes. (RS)

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE SEMICOLONS GONE?

Perhaps the fact that most of my students have been reared on television and/or have spent more time watching television than reading, many of my students do not write well. In addition what my students read, may not necessarily contain good writing or correct grammar. Whereas, a Janet Daley novel and USA Today do meet certain needs, they are not higher level ones. Written English differs from spoken English in its use of complex structures, which promote higher level thinking skills and creative thought.

Because of television and simplistic writing, many of my students have only had slight brushes with the use of colons and semicolons and other parts of grammar that could make these students more articulate and creative.

In order to augment, challenge and improve my students' written skills and vocabulary, I use a variety of sentence pattern exercises and sentence combining lessons based on the students' own work.

PART ONE: Play with words

I begin this assignment by requiring each student in my composition class to bring a typed copy (or neatly written) draft to class. This draft may be a paper from another class or it may be a section from a creative work that the student has previously composed. If a student needs a topic, I assign it. After I have collected and reviewed these works, I present in the next class session xeroxed sets of only one or two of these drafts, which are then distributed to each student.

At the beginning of this draft session, I ask the students to do two of the following:

1. Count the number of words with the sentences in one of the paragraphs from a paragraph that I indicate OR from any paragraph of their choosing.

2. Underline the subject and the verb of each sentence in that paragraph.

3. Try to begin one sentence in that paragraph with the VERB by adding '-ed' or '-ing'.

4. Rewrite two sentences in that paragraph if both sentences contain less than ten words.

5. Write a 18-20 word sentence using 'and' or 'but' or 'when'.

6. Write a sentence that uses a colon or semicolon.

7. Write a sentence that uses a reference (e.g. definition, a quote from a famous person, political or sports figure, etc.)

Part II: The exchange or we have to stop meeting like this.

During the next class session, I distribute new sets of works from the original drafts and ask the students to change not two but at least three sentences in the manner that was indicated from the list in Part I. In addition, I ask the students to underline one of their best rewritten sentences and then to underline their worst. Each student is then asked to write the poorly* written sentence on a sheet of paper.

The students next exchange sentences and then work together in teams to try to improve the sentence. When the student reads this "poorly" written sentence; in turn the student must talk to the original student writer. At this point, each peer reviewer must write suggested revisions to the sentence using one of the suggested ideas listed above.

If time permits, students rewrite one paragraph of a duplicated essay in class; time not permitting, this exercise then becomes a homework assignment.

In conclusion, I have found that this series of exercises works with my students: they learn more vocabulary, they stretch their minds and discover new ideas. And yes those colons and semi-colons which I thought had disappered down the television tubes or over the USA Today microwave satellite beams do reappear.

*Poorly written sentence =1) A sentence that has to be reread more than twice as its meaning appears unclear to the reader. 2) A sentence that is a fragment.